

RESIDENT CANADA GOOSE MANAGEMENT

Questions and Answers

The following document answers some common questions about the issue of overabundant resident Canada goose populations and the draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) and the proposed rule the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has developed.

What are resident Canada geese and how do they differ from other Canada geese?

Most of the 11 subspecies of Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*) are encountered in the lower 48 States only during the fall, winter and spring of the year and migrate to the arctic and sub-arctic regions of Canada and Alaska to nest. Some, however, reside in the U.S. year around. To distinguish these resident Canada geese from their migratory brethren, the Service identifies “resident Canada geese” as those that nest within the lower 48 States in the months of March, April, May, or June, and that reside within the lower 48 States in the months of April, May, June, July, and August. Canada geese normally return to the same breeding areas and no evidence presently exists documenting inter-breeding between Canada geese nesting within the lower 48 States and those subspecies nesting in northern Canada and Alaska.

What is the status of resident Canada goose populations?

The Service’s best estimate places the total number of resident Canada geese in the United States at 3.2 million. The population has increased dramatically during the past several decades. Presently, resident Canada goose populations in both the Atlantic and Mississippi Flyways exceed 1 million birds each and have increased an average of 5 and 6 percent per year, respectively, over the last 10 years. Indices of resident Canada geese in the Central Flyway are now approaching 1 million birds and populations in the western portions of the country have shown similar growth rates over the past 10 years.

Why has their population grown so much that they have become a problem?

The rapid increase of resident Canada goose populations has been attributed to a number of factors. Most resident Canada geese live in temperate climates with relatively stable breeding habitat conditions and low numbers of predators. They tolerate human and other disturbances, have a relative abundance of preferred habitat (especially those located in urban/suburban areas with current landscaping techniques), and fly relatively short distances to winter compared with other Canada goose populations. Additionally, Canada geese, like other geese, are long-lived birds. This combination of factors contributes to consistently high annual production and survival. Further, the virtual absence of waterfowl hunting in urban areas provides additional protection to those urban portions of the population. Given these characteristics, most resident Canada goose populations are continuing to increase in both rural and urban areas.

What kind of problems do they cause?

Large flocks of resident Canada geese can denude grassy areas, including parks, pastures, golf

courses, lawns, and other landscaped areas where the grass is kept short and where there are ponds, lakes, and other bodies of water nearby. At airports, resident Canada geese have become a significant safety threat, resulting in dangerous takeoff and landing conditions, costly repairs, and fatal airplane accidents. Excessive goose droppings are also a health concern, and have contributed to the temporary closure of public beaches in several States by local health departments. In addition, agricultural and natural resource damage, including depredation of grain crops, overgrazed pastures and degraded water quality, have increased as resident Canada goose populations have grown. Losses can be significant.

What is a draft EIS and why was its preparation necessary?

An EIS is required by the National Environmental Policy Act to assess the potential environmental impacts of any proposed major Federal action and to offer reasonable alternatives. Since the purpose of the draft EIS is to evaluate alternative strategies to reduce, manage, and control resident Canada goose populations in the continental United States and to reduce related damages, any ultimate decision to implement an alternative strategy to manage resident Canada geese constitutes a major Federal action. The DEIS documents this assessment and, together with supporting documents, considerations, data, and public comments, will be used by the Service's Director to prepare a final EIS from which to select the appropriate alternative for implementation.

The DEIS is a comprehensive programmatic plan intended to guide and direct resident Canada goose population control and management activities in the conterminous United States. The objective of the DEIS and any ultimate proposal is to provide a regulatory mechanism that will allow State and local agencies, other Federal agencies, and groups and individuals to respond to damage complaints or damages by resident Canada geese. Any strategy should be more effective than the current system; environmentally sound, cost-effective, and flexible enough to meet the variety of management needs found throughout the Flyways. Further, the management strategy should not threaten viable resident Canada goose populations, as determined by each Flyway Council, and must be developed in accordance with the mission of the Service.

What would happen to the resident Canada goose population if we did nothing?

With no action, the Service estimates that the population of resident geese in most areas would continue to increase until reaching the carrying capacity of the environment at some time in the future. As the populations grew, the conflicts would grow increasingly unbearable. In the Atlantic Flyway, we estimate that the population will approach 1.3 million in 5 years and 1.6 million in 10 years. In the Mississippi Flyway, we estimate that the population will approach 1.7 million in 5 years and 2.0 million in 10 years. In the Central Flyway, we estimate that the numbers will approach 1.3 million by 2010. In the Pacific Flyway, we estimate that the populations will approach 450,000 geese by 2010.

What action does the Service propose to address the problem?

In light of the projected increases in resident Canada goose populations (despite past and current

management actions), we believe a much more aggressive management program is warranted and must be implemented. Under the “State Empowerment” alternative, State wildlife management agencies would be provided flexibility to deal with the problems caused by resident Canada goose populations within their respective States. States could choose to implement specific strategies, such as specific depredation orders on nests and eggs, at airports, at agricultural areas, or at locations where public health may be an issue; expanded hunting opportunities; or other indirect and/or direct population control strategies. The Service believes the combination of various management strategies would successfully reduce numbers of resident Canada geese to more acceptable levels.

What is the relationship between the draft Environmental Impact Statement and the proposed rule?

The proposed rule is a regulatory component that will implement the preferred alternative in the draft EIS. The Service is soliciting comments on the draft EIS, the guiding document that outlines alternatives and impacts, and the proposed rule, the regulation that will implement the preferred alternative.

How does the proposed alternative address the protections afforded Canada geese by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA)?

The MBTA provides for the protection and conservation of migratory birds (including resident Canada geese), while at the same time providing opportunities for people to use the resource for sport, recreation, and scientific endeavors. The MBTA also provides considerable flexibility for dealing with situations where birds may come into conflict with human interests, such as those posed by the increasing numbers of resident Canada geese.

Why isn't the existing program adequate for dealing with resident Canada goose problems?

Normally, complex Federal and State responsibilities are involved with Canada goose control activities. All control activities, except those intended to either scare geese out of or preclude them from using a specific area (e.g., harassment, habitat management, or repellents), require a Federal permit issued by the Service. As the number of problems with resident Canada geese have continued to grow, the Service, with its State and Federal partners, believes alternative strategies are needed beyond those presently employed to reduce, manage, and control resident Canada goose populations in the continental United States and to reduce related damages. In this way, all agencies can provide the most responsible, cost-effective, biologically-sound, and efficient assistance available.

The Service has attempted to control and manage growing populations of resident Canada geese through existing annual hunting season frameworks (special and regular seasons), the issuance of control permits on a case-by-case basis, and special Canada goose permits. While this approach has provided relief in some areas, it has not completely addressed the problem. We realize that more management flexibility is necessary to meet the needs of the public. Because of the unique

locations where large numbers of these geese nest, feed, and reside, the Service believes that new and innovative approaches and strategies for dealing with bird/human conflicts are necessary.

How is the proposed alternative different from the special Canada goose permit? Doesn't the special Canada goose permit give States flexibility to manage resident Canada goose populations?

While the special Canada goose permit is more flexible than the permit-by-permit issuance system and has provided relief in some areas, it has not completely addressed the problem. In fact, when the Service established the new special permit several years ago, we stated that we viewed the permit as a short-term approach. The objective of the DEIS is to look at long-term approaches and strategies. In the long-term, the Service believes that more management flexibility will be necessary to meet the needs of the public.

It is important to remember the DEIS is a comprehensive programmatic plan intended to guide and direct resident Canada goose population control and management activities in the lower 48 States. As such, we have attempted to incorporate the Flyway management plans and the Flyway population objectives developed by the Flyway Councils into the formulation of this alternative to help define its objectives for acceptable resident Canada goose population reduction and management. Given the already large numbers of resident Canada geese, and the numbers that must be reduced, we believe the only way to possibly attain these goals is to give the States more flexibility to address the problems caused by resident Canada goose populations. By addressing population reductions on the widest number of available fronts, we believe the combination of various damage management strategies and population control strategies can successfully reduce numbers of resident Canada geese, especially in those priority areas identified by the States.

For example, under the proposed alternative, there is no specific requirement for the issuance of a permit or subpermit to anyone authorized to carry out management or control activities. Further, the alternative allows a State to provide expanded hunter opportunities not available under the special Canada goose permit and authorizes the take of resident Canada geese in August outside the normal hunting season frameworks of September 1 to March 10.

I am currently suffering damage and other economic losses due to resident Canada geese. How does the proposed action help me?

Depending on what management strategies your State elects to implement, your damage and losses could be significantly reduced. For example, if you are an agricultural producer, your State could choose to allow you to aggressively harass resident Canada geese that are causing problems on your property.

Why was the proposed action largely limited to situations between April 1 to August 31?

Migratory Canada goose populations interact and overlap with resident Canada goose populations during the fall and winter. Migratory Canada geese, therefore, could be impacted by management actions and programs targeted at reducing resident Canada goose populations during this time.

To avoid potential conflicts with other Canada goose populations, most aspects of the proposed alternative are restricted to the period April 1 through August 31 each year. However, some resident Canada geese begin nesting in the early spring, and therefore the proposed alternative does allow the take of Canada goose nests and eggs during the entire month of March, since any nesting Canada geese in the U.S. would clearly be resident birds.

What effect will the proposed alternative have on resident Canada goose populations?

Resident Canada goose number are so abundant (3.2 million in the United States) that even with these additional control measures, the Service estimates that their population will continue to be healthy and large. These measures may even benefit the population by reducing it to a level that is in better balance with available food and habitat.

What impact will the proposed alternative have on existing sport-hunting opportunities?

Regular hunting seasons would be largely unaffected under the “State Empowerment” alternative. Most goose population reductions would occur in areas already closed to hunting or with limited hunting.

Alternatively, special hunting opportunities for resident Canada geese and potential harvest would be significantly increased. States could opt to increase and expand special hunting opportunities for resident Canada geese through newly-available hunting methods and an expansion of the special seasons. The proposed alternative would authorize the use of additional hunting methods, such as electronic calls, unplugged shotguns, and expanded shooting hours (one-half hour after sunset). During existing, operational, special September Canada goose seasons (i.e., September 1-15), these additional hunting methods would be available for use on an operational basis. Utilization of these additional hunting methods during any new special seasons or other existing, operational special seasons (i.e., September 15-30) could be approved as experimental and would require demonstration of a minimal impact to migrant Canada goose populations. All of these expanded hunting methods and opportunities would be in accordance with the existing Migratory Bird Treaty frameworks for sport hunting seasons (i.e., 107 day limit from September 1 to March 10) and would be conducted outside any other open waterfowl season (i.e., when all other waterfowl and crane seasons were closed).

Take of resident Canada geese outside the existing Migratory Bird Treaty frameworks for sport hunting seasons (i.e., 107-day limit from September 1 to March 10) would also be available under this proposed rule by creation of a new subpart to 50 CFR part 21 specifically for the management of overabundant resident Canada goose populations. Under this new subpart, we would establish a regulation under the authority of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act with the intent to reduce and/or stabilize resident Canada goose population levels. The “managed take” regulation would authorize each State in eligible areas to initiate aggressive resident Canada goose take strategies, within the conditions that we provide, with the intent to reduce the populations. The regulation will enable States to use the general public acting under strict program controls to kill resident Canada geese, by way of shooting in a hunting manner, during the August 1 through September 15 period when all waterfowl and crane hunting seasons,

excluding falconry, are closed, inside or outside the migratory bird hunting season frameworks. The regulation would also authorize the use of additional methods of take to kill resident Canada geese during that period. The regulation would authorize the use of electronic calls and unplugged shotguns, liberalize daily bag limits on resident Canada geese, and allow shooting hours to continue until one-half hour after sunset. The Service would annually assess the overall impact and effectiveness of the “managed take” regulation to ensure compatibility with long-term conservation of this resource. If at any time evidence is presented that clearly demonstrates that there no longer exists a serious threat of injury to the area or areas involved for a particular resident Canada goose population, we will initiate action to suspend the regulation, and/or regular-season regulation changes, for that population. Suspension of regulations for a particular population would be made following a public review process.

Would these new, expanded take provisions make a difference?

The expanded take provisions have the potential to increase our ability to manage resident goose populations at sustainable levels. Available information from the use of additional take methods, such as electronic calls, unplugged shotguns, and expanded shooting hours, during the special light goose seasons indicates that total harvest increased approximately 50 percent to 69 percent. On specific days when light goose special regulations were in effect, the mean light goose harvest increased 244 percent. One study showed that lesser snow goose flocks were five times more likely to fly within gun range (≤ 50 meters) in response to electronic calls than to traditional calls, and the mean number of snow geese killed per hour per hunter averaged 9.1 times greater for electronic calls than for traditional calls. Given a total special season harvest of approximately 520,000 geese, a 50 percent increase in special season and managed take would result in the harvest of an additional 260,000 resident Canada geese each year. A 70 percent increase in special season and conservation season harvest would result in an additional 364,000 resident Canada geese annually. While we believe a more conservative estimate of the percentage increase in take attributable to the use of additional methods within and outside the hunting season frameworks would be 25 percent, this increase in special season harvest and managed take would still result in the take of an additional 130,000 Canada geese each year.

What assurances are there that States would not overharvest these birds and harm the population?

In addition to required annual breeding surveys, the Service would annually assess the overall impact and effectiveness of the managed take provisions to ensure compatibility with long-term conservation of this resource. If at any time evidence is presented that clearly demonstrates that there no longer exists a serious threat of injury to the area or areas involved for a particular resident Canada goose population, we will initiate action to suspend the special provisions, and/or regular-season regulation changes, for that population. Suspension of regulations for a particular population would be made following a public review process.

Aren't non-lethal control techniques effective in reducing conflicts between resident Canada geese and people?

The Service also prefers nonlethal control activities, such as habitat modification, as the first means of eliminating resident Canada goose conflict/damage problems. However, habitat modification and other harassment tactics do not always work satisfactorily and lethal methods are sometimes necessary to increase the effectiveness of nonlethal management methods.

While it is unlikely that all resident Canada goose/human conflicts can be eliminated in all urban settings, implementation of broad-scale resident Canada goose management activities may reduce the likelihood for other management actions, such as large-scale goose round-ups and lethal control.

Would non-lethal control measures still be permitted under the draft EIS?

The State Empowerment alternative does not absolve affected parties from the responsibility of employing non-lethal control techniques. It simply provides additional tools for use in an integrated approach to reducing problems caused by resident Canada geese. We believe that the States and the public should share responsibility for reducing resident Canada goose problems and should promote other activities that exclude or repel resident Canada geese, as well as the use of non-lethal deterrents.